YEARS OF CHICAGO
Forming A Soul*

I prepared these remarks to pay homage to my teachers at the University of Chicago, to those of them who were members of the Committee on Social Thought during my student days in particular, but especially to John U. Nef, the founder, leading spirit, and first chairman of an institution conceived by him as an institute for the study of civilization. It would be rash of me to try and evaluate the scholarly work of these teachers or the range of their impact on their colleagues and many generations of students, but not perhaps rash to recall their impact on me as I listened to them during my student days and their impact on my work after I left the Committee on Social Thought. All this will necessarily be personal and anecdotal. Since I never managed to keep a diary, I am reduced to what I can now recollect across more than four decades.

If my memory does not fail me, the majority of the relatively few students enrolled in the Committee on Social Thought in the late forties, like students in other interdepartmental Committees in the Divisions of the Social Sciences and the Humanities, came or transferred largely from within the University of Chicago, having been students in what was known across the country as Hutchins' College, or else in one of the regular departments for a year or two. The Committee on Social Thought had been formed only a few

years earlier and was not particularly well known at the time, either nationally or internationally, except perhaps in France, a country particularly dear to John Nef. I belonged to those who transferred from the Department of Economics. I was only one of hundreds of foreign students who arrived to study at the University of Chicago that year as a result of a combination of some choices and a number of coincidences. Still, the story of a student from Baghdad who ended up in the Department of Economics and then transferred to the Committee on Social Thought perhaps deserves a brief account. At least, it may serve as an example of how this Committee offered one young man a unique opportunity shortly after the end of the Second World War to develop an interest that combined the rigor of the training offered by the specialized departments with broader concerns for the meaning of the past and the fate of humanity at large, in particular the fate of what was then called the underdeveloped world; then the third world, but for which a new name needs to be found now that the second world has collapsed.

Left to my own devices, I would perhaps never had anything to do with economics or the University of Chicago. My first choice after graduating from high school was to go to Cairo and study art history—Cairo and Beirut were university towns accessible to students from Baghdad in 1943; the war raging farther west excluded Europe and the United States. But family and community pressures decided that the only way for me to go abroad and be supported through many years of undergraduate and perhaps graduate studies was if I were to return with a degree in banking, and that meant agreeing to go and study at the American University of Beirut. In Beirut, I kept trying to evade that subject and devote as much time as possible to the study of philosophy. It was there that I first heard of the University of Chicago, due to the fame of its Department of Philosophy since the days of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. Pragmatism was one of the types of philosophy we read

about in the book entitled *Types of Philosophy* by William E. Hocking. At the end of the second year as an undergraduate, I managed to convince my philosophy teacher to recommend to the Ministry of Education in Baghdad that I be allowed to study philosophy instead; but that recommendation was finally turned down by the British Adviser to the Minister of Education, a gentleman who thought he had the best interest of the nascent Kingdom of Iraq at heart and no doubt my own interest as well. So I completed the undergraduate studies and somehow received the proper degree, even though my heart and mind were largely occupied with philosophy and literature.

I was fortunate to have two outstanding teachers at the American University of Beirut notable for their knowledge and culture and for their ability to interest their students in the works of the mind. The first was the philosopher Charles Malik, who had been a student of Whitehead at Harvard and Heidegger at Freiburg i/Br. during the thirties and had a great gift of persuasion: listening to him convinced one that the pursuit of wisdom is the only pursuit worth living for. The second was the historian Constantine Zurayk, a historian of the Middle East during the Middle Ages, who had been a student of Philip K. Hitti at Princeton at the same time. On the basis of our performance at the end of the second year, a few of us were selected to lodge and eat together in a small house—called the Lodge—overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, where we were entertained by resident and visiting faculty, poets, and artists, who joined us for meals and stayed to converse and sometimes give formal talks after dinner. One of my friends at the Lodge and in the Philosophy Department, Hisham Sharabi, went to the University of Chicago immediately after graduation, while I spent the year 1947-1948 in Baghdad teaching and learning more about the country. When the opportunity to proceed with graduate study presented itself—again in banking, of course—I wrote to him, and it was he who sent me the admission documents. When I inquired whether anyone in Baghdad had

been to Chicago to study, I was directed to the archaeologist and student of ancient history, Fuad Safar, whom I visited in his office at the Iraq Museum: he spoke with affection and respect of the Oriental Institute as a great center for the study of ancient Near Eastern civilizations.

Travel from Baghdad to Chicago took much longer in those days, and I managed to extend it further by arranging to spend the summer in Paris on the way. As civil aviation had been reintroduced after the war, I was flown first to Cairo, having the opportunity to visit the pyramids of Giza for the first time and to spend the night there at the old Semiramis Hotel whose garden stretched all the way to the bank of the Nile. Then on to Marseille, but not without a refueling stop at Wheeler Air Base in Libya and another overnight stay in Malta. Then, after a third night spent in Marseille, there was a train ride to Paris, where I was met at the station by a younger friend from Baghdad, Husain Haddawy, who was later to make me famous by translating into English the medieval Arabic version of the *Arabian Nights* I was to edit. At the end of the summer, I had to proceed to London, then fly from there to some place in Scotland, where the BOAS plane which was able to provide travelers with rather comfortable canvas beds—went overnight to New York via two refueling stops: Shannon and Gander. From New York, I went first by train to Washington to meet friends and check with the Embassy, and then at last to Chicago.

Chicago was a long way indeed from Baghdad. Beirut at the time was still a sleepy provincial Mediterranean town. Paris was of course an exciting metropolis, yet grimy and lean, struggling to recover from the war. By comparison, the combination of energy, size, and prosperity made Chicago a very special city, projecting awe-inspiring power. The first impression of the University of Chicago campus in the fall of 1948, on the other hand, was exhilarating: it seemed majestic and serious looking, but with numerous inner gardens and next

to the vast open Midway; the austere aspect of the gray stone buildings was mitigated by the greenery both outside and inside the Quadrangles. The Midway and the surrounding neighborhood were thoroughly peaceful; one could walk through the neighborhood and the major parks at the two ends of the Midway at any time of day or night—and of course shop and eat on Sixty-third and Fifty-fifth streets, streets that were prosperous commercial thorough-fares—without fear or the sense of being in a deserted or decrepit neighborhood.

Upon arrival at the Midway I lodged first in International House, where Hisham Sharabi was staying at the time. This was an ideal place to meet students from many parts of the world—at the time from Europe, South America, and the Caribbean in particular—and from which to explore the university and the city of Chicago. I had applied to the Department of Economics, but was accepted in the Business School. So my first task upon arrival was to transfer to the Department of Economics, where I was immediately attracted to the lecture courses of the economic theorist Frank Knight, the economic historian Earl J. Hamilton, and John Nef, whose references to the Committee on Social Thought were my first introduction to his beloved institution.

Through Hisham Sharabi I was also introduced to the teachers he had known during the preceding academic year and went to hear them. They included the cultural historian Arnold Bergstraesser with whom I was to study cultural history, medieval German mysticism, Goethe, and Heidegger; later, I was to follow him to Freiburg i/Br. Richard McKeon, then Dean of the Division of the Humanities, was interpreting classical texts in Swift Hall. I recall especially listening to him read and comment on the first two books of Aristotle's *Politics* for the period of a whole Quarter, thus forcing one to read slowly and carefully and look for the way the author moved step by step in making his argument. I recall attending, as the Dean's representative, a doctoral examination many years later

where Richard McKeon, to my full satisfaction, tore a contemporary analytical dissertation to shreds. At the time I was not aware of the conflict between the "analysts" and the "historians" which had pitted Richard McKeon against John Nef. I was interested in both philosophic analysis—though not particularly in Richard McKeon's impressive schema—and in the philosophy of history, but was destined to join the historians' camp, partly because I was interested in the phenomenon of the transmission of philosophy across national borders and the role of contextual history in this process.

Then, in 1949, Leo Strauss arrived. In October of that year he gave the Walgreen Lectures that were later published as *Natural Right and History*, and he went on to lecture on the classics of political philosophy in the Department of Political Science, preaching the comforting thought that wisdom was to be sought among the Ancients, especially Plato and Aristotle; that things had been going downhill ever since; and that the world as we knew it was not going to last much longer due to the inevitable conflagration that was soon to come (it looked at the time as though nuclear war was imminent); yet we must go down fighting, that is, knowing ourselves and the truth of our past. Strauss's Walgreen Lectures began with what seemed to me at the time a savage attack on Max Weber and Martin Heidegger, the main gurus of modern social science and philosophy with whom I was just beginning a slight acquaintance.This was followed by conversations in the tearoom in the Social Science Building where I learned that he was acquainted with Ibn Khaldun's major work on the manuscripts of whose writings I had been working at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris the summer before. But I had no idea at the time that, while still in Europe, he had written rather extensively on Arabic—both Islamic and Jewish—philosophy during the Middle Ages. This was followed by a tutorial on the *Leviathan*: somehow I was hunted by him, even though it was some time before I had the

opportunity to attend his seminars on a regular basis and work closely with him on my dissertation. I must admit that the only reason I later returned to the University of Chicago to teach was to be close to him for a while longer. Then Iraqi politics took a new turn and I was stranded away from home for good.

In the meantime, I was reveling in what I was hearing from my teachers at the Committee on Social Thought especially David Grene on Greek literature, Yves Simon on medieval philosophy, Otto von Simson on medieval architecture, and of course John Nef—from whom I learned the meaning of commitment to searching for whatever truth was communicated throughout the Western tradition from the classical Greeks to the moderns. But it would be a mistake not to emphasize the importance of the University of Chicago as a whole, which provided the broader context. The Committee on Social Thought did not exist in isolation. The enormous strength of the graduate divisions and departments—especially and more immediately those in the social sciences and the humanities—the innovative College, the towering and stimulating presence of Robert Hutchins as Chancellor, as well as the enormous energy displayed by the city of Chicago—its no nonsense, hardworking spirit. What made the Committee on Social Thought such a wonderful place to study was its location at the heart of such a great university and such a great city. And John Nef, who was trying to articulate the new form of "specialization" at which the Committee on Social Thought aimed, knew from experience that the new spirit he was trying to encourage could only flourish in close relation with the progress and quality of the specialized studies which, he was the first to admit, would have to continue to be the norm, even though he was constantly arguing against their domination if not their tyranny. Nor was everything taught in the regular departments the old fashioned form of specialization. Hutchins had seen to it that there was a certain mixture of the old and the new, the very specialized and the interdisciplinary,

the conservatives and the rebels.

The faculty of the Committee on Social Thought consisted of a group of rather intense personalities who exhibited an almost religious fervor—regardless of whether they were for or against formal religion. The joke went around that the University of Chicago was a place where Jewish faculty were preaching Thomas Aquinas's philosophy to Protestant students. But one was struck with the importance of the Middle Ages, its literature, art, and philosophy. I never knew how credible were the rumors of conversion to Catholicism. No one was ever rumored to have been converted to Judaism, Islam, or Protestantism, to say nothing of Hinduism, but conversion to Catholicism, secret or overt, was something one was not surprised to hear about, which I assume was a sign of a religious awakening of sorts. Joachim Wach was teaching Indian religions in the Divinity School. But there was no cause for alarm about the faith of students in the Divinity School, since Wach was quick to explain that the study of other religions presented no threat to Protestant theology. India, which was later to be domesticated by the social sciences, was not felt as a threat to established religion. In any case, the Romantic study of the Orient during the nineteenth century had not led to conversion to Hinduism, but back to the Middle Ages and to Catholicism, exemplified in Friedrich Schlegel's conversion. John Nef used to refer to Henry Adams's *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* with particular affection.

Hand in hand with the return to the Middle Ages was the effort to return from the Oriental Renaissance of the nineteenth century to the first Renaissance, signalled by the publication of *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* by the University of Chicago Press. There was a tendency to abolish the Romantic-Oriental Renaissance, return to the seventeenth/eighteenth-century and to the original Renaissance, and re-establish the pre-eminence and uniqueness of the Greco-Latin world as the true source of the Western humanistic

tradition. John Nef's work at the time lay emphasis exclusively on the West, as he was only too willing to confess. But the Committee on Social Thought allowed and encouraged students interested in so-called non-Western studies: the Islamic world, India, China, Japan. Still, it appeared that there was an attempt to center attention on the Western world. Judaism and Christianity may have been seen as a parallel tradition, or even as a second source of the Western tradition that may not have been quite compatible with the first, but that other tradition was eventually reinterpreted though the late Greco-Latin tradition, a reinterpretation that reached its full flowering in Aquinas and the Middle Ages—that is, the synthesis of the original Greek (Aristotle) and the original Neoplatonic reinterpretation of Judaism (Christianity). However this may have been, what is true is that the University of Chicago's faculty in the Social Sciences and the Humanities Divisions, with a few exceptions such as the Sinologist Herrlee Creel, was almost wholly a Western oriented faculty, with the Oriental Institute seeking the roots of the Old Testament and the New Testament, and of Greece, in the ancient Near East.

The University of Chicago was known at the time, and may still be for all I know, as the hotbed of the Great Books curriculum. They were, of course, the great books of the Western world. Some questions may have been raised regarding some of the particular books included or excluded from the list of these great books, but never about their being exclusively books of the Western world. This had the advantage of encouraging students to go deeper into what is known or things related to what is known, of what is significant rather than what is novel or strange. There were no unknown civilizations to discover or unknown languages to decipher in these great books. One had the impression that the important works of the mind were already there, edited and translated, and that the work that remained to be done was to understand their message, discuss it, and learn its implications for life. One ought to

remember perhaps that by the late forties Japan lay prostrate before General MacArthur; China was slipping behind its own curtain; the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were going behind the Iron Curtain and toward the denial of their cultural past; India had just emerged as an independent country after a long period of subjugation to the ideas of Macaulay and his friends—200 years of westernization had left it a pale image of itself. There was little competition with the Western tradition at the time.

As for the general course of Western civilization, one got the impression that it had its great moments in the past: the Greeks, the Middle Ages, and the seventeenth century. Since then, there was decline and departure from the heights it had reached earlier. Thus there was the need for return. Leo Strauss gave a series of lectures under the title "Progress or Return." T. S. Eliot and Jacques Maritain were for return also. Yves Simon and Otto von Simson, and eventually John Nef, were models of Catholic sobriety. No one was preaching the doctrine of progress any more, The possibility of progress was understood—as the ancients understood it—to be confined to technical matters and inventions in such things as industry and medicine. The further back one went into the history of Western civilization, the more unity could be discerned: in seventeenth-century France, in the cathedral of Chartres and the works of Aquinas, in classical Greece. Coming out of a World War that had torn the Western world asunder, one was particularly interested in what allows human life to hang together, in what makes for unity rather than what makes for difference and leads to conflict. What tears societies and individuals apart was not of much interest. One worked on an Encyclopedia of Unified Sciences, on a Syntopicon that listed the main ideas in the Great Books, on a constitution for a world community. Nineteenth-century Romantic thought was alive in the special concern and reverence for the European Middle Ages; in the study of French cathedrals and German mysticism;

in the renewed interest in theosophy and alchemy; and in the renewed interest in a new world political system (Giuseppe Borghese's seminar on Dante). The high Middle Ages were reclaimed as "classical."

This, then, was the general mood at the University of Chicago and to some extent in the Committee on Social Thought as well. If there was an ideology concerning the rest of the world, it was perhaps best expressed by Arnold Toynbee. After listening to one of his lectures in the seminar room on the third floor of the Social Science Building, I asked him as we were taking the elevator about the prospects for the rest of the world, the so-called Oriental peoples. His answer was that the only hope was through their adopting Western civilization. Toynbee, one must remember, was heir to a point of view developed in England during the nineteenth century when the Anglicists gained the upper hand over the Orientalists in running the affairs of the East India Company and of India.

The great books of the Western world could be read and discussed without any need to know the original languages in which they were written. This was partly a practical question, for hardly anyone could be expected to acquire expert knowledge in all the languages in which these books were written; and yet an educated person was supposed to be acquainted with these books. The original language was certainly useful and necessary for original, creative work. It was useful for checking translations, crucial terms, or particular concepts. In general, however, or for the sake of liberal education, works were read in translation. The language in which the author wrote was not thought indispensable for studying or understanding his argument, or even enjoying the art of his writing—provided one realized that one was looking at the original through a screen. This was the great books tradition. The notion of a "masterpiece," which had lost much of its uniqueness during the nineteenth century, and especially during the first part of the twentieth, due to the thought that it

was relative to the period and conditions in which it was written, was thus reinstated. There could be only so many great books, an argument supported by the notion that life is short and one had to choose. The Fundamentals in the Committee on Social Thought, the only common preparation that all students had to undergo, was related to the great books tradition; and it usually included some of the works in the canonical great books of the Western World. But it was quite flexible, and arguments could be made for including works outside the canon. In my case it had to include Gibbon, but to make up for the length of the *Decline*, it also included T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

Attention centered on what were called the great works of the mind, which I believe meant, apart from the great books, the great works of art—architecture, sculpture, and painting. No one was studying archaeology or popular culture, and no one dared to correct or modify the content of the great books through the findings of archaeology or mythology, or was allowed to relativize them in any way. It was as though they were pure reason or revealed truth; and the only appropriate task was to find out what they were saying, what they were really saying, what they were truly saying. This encouraged students to confront these works directly and make a serious effort to understand what their arguments were about. There was the ever-present question about the context, social and cultural background, and so forth of the author one read; but these remained for the most part unanswered or unanswerable questions. It was argued that the authors of these great books had a better understanding of the social and cultural context of their works than anyone could ever hope to gain from modern archaeology and social science, which tend to reconstruct such social and cultural contexts, and that such reconstructions are not quite reliable.

The faculty of the Committee on Social Thought, rather small compared to that of a major university department, could be easily distinguished from most other faculty. It was easy to

feel their personal commitment and involvement in the subjects they were studying and teaching, as if its exposition and understanding constituted their lives, the cause to which they had devoted themselves. No one presented himself as merely an expert, a master of a new technique, a teacher of a special method, or a person who had any reserve about, or kept his distance from what he was teaching. None of them attempted to attract large numbers of students through studied rhetoric. Nor, of course, did any of the use works of other contemporary writers as textbooks, a word mentioned only to be sneered at. By and large, classes consisted of analysis and interpretation of the classics, or else listening to a faculty member reading part of his current writing, a draft of a forthcoming book. This was a natural transition for me when I later went to Freiburg i/Br. and witnessed professors come in, ascend the podium, open a manuscript, proclaim "Meine Damen und Herren," and plunge into their manuscripts—only to stop at the ringing of the bell, even though they may have been in the middle of one of those long learned sentences. In some cases, it was as if the effort to explain a particular subject matter meant everything—was truly what mattered for human life and the future of civilization. Some were serene; others exhibited signs of inner tension; none was putting on a show. Noble inquisitiveness is what characterized the attitude of the faculty, compared to the proud indifference that was the pride of the great teachers in many departments. The dominant passion in the Committee on Social Thought seemed to give meaning to the hard labor of scholarship, and the combination of the passion and hard labor made a life devoted to study and reflection meaningful and worth living. There was no nit-picking, no dusting off old objects and books. The model presented by our teachers in the Committee on Social Thought was that of simply doing what was worthwhile rather than paying attention to scholarly fashions. This applied also to text editing, translation, criticism, and historical synthesis. Above all, there was a common

passion for, and delight in, the analysis and interpretation of important books and works of art.

The Committee on Social Thought paid particular attention to style, and one slowly learned to distinguish between various types and levels rhetoric and of the rhetoric of inquiry. Bad writing was discouraged, if not forbidden; and writers not known for classical styles were not mentioned in good society. The only time I recall hearing about Plotinus was in a lecture by Yves Simon's friend and colleague from Paris, Olivier Lacombe, a Sanskrit specialist who came to lecture on Plotinus and Indian thought; and he did not seem to despise his Asiatic connection or the contamination with Indian mysticism. (The first volume of the *Enneads* in the Loeb Classical Library was not published until 1966, and it was not until 1988 that the last volume appeared, indicating how slight the demand had then been among Anglo-Saxon students of the Classics for this kind of style, or thought, for that matter. The Latins were similarly neglected as late comers.) Here our teachers' styles, written and oral, were decisive, even though in some cases we had to strain ourselves to follow their foreign—German, Italian, or French—accents.

As students we learned to overcome the common temptation of following the latest fashion in the social sciences or in the humanities. The fact was that we had two homes: the specialized department or departments and the Committee on Social Thought. In the department one learned to be methodical and to gain access to all the necessary research instruments, source material, latest discoveries in the field, as well all the most advanced approaches to it; while in the Committee on Social Thought one had to justify a particular pursuit in broader, humane terms, before teachers and friends who had no specialized knowledge of the subject matter. The criteria were: Is it worth doing? Are the results being communicated successfully to the nonspecialist? What is the relevance of the work to the current questions raised by the social sciences?

What is its place in the humanistic tradition?

Since none of the Committee on Social Thought faculty and hardly any of the students in that Committee were specialists in one's own field of study, one was constantly challenged to explain and justify the particular inquiry he was engaged in. What was its relevance to the broader concerns, intellectual or political, of the time? Did it contribute anything to the questions agitating the intellectual community here and now regarding such questions as relativism, progress, fact-value distinction, or historicism? Did it contribute anything to the questions being asked in other fields of inquiry? There was constant contact with the problems, difficulties, and questions raised in other fields of inquiry in the humanities and the social sciences—questions which students in more specialized departments may have taken for granted. Thus a student developed a lifetime habit of always being curious, open yet critical, about the emergence of new forms of inquiry in parallel fields of study, as well as friendships and memories that persisted after one left the Committee on Social Thought.

Then there were the university-wide public lectures that brought distinguished scholars, as well as practitioners of the arts, who spoke about the old and the new in all fields. There seemed to be quite a few of these public lectures—given as individual lectures or as lecture series—each Quarter. They took place in large halls and seemed to be always overcrowded with eager listeners, and what was said in them was discussed later on in seminars and small groups. This was an opportunity to be acquainted with what the University of Chicago faculty at large was engaged in and to hear distinguished foreign visitors and nationally known figures. The Committee on Social Thought, in the person of its Chairman, John Nef, contributed to this activity by inviting the "nonspecialized" lecturers, including a number from abroad whom he hosted during their visits to Chicago. I recall especially the opportunity to listen to and talk with T. S. Eliot and Marc Chagall, whom he had

known in Europe.

It is hard to think of the Committee on Social Thought during the forties and fifties without thinking of John Nef as its central figure. He had an angelic smile that never seemed to leave his face—unless he became angry, which was not very often—and a generosity of spirit that seemed to be second nature. Since he was a member of the Department of Economics, and I was encouraged to transfer to the Committee on Social Thought by colleagues he knew and whose judgment he trusted, such as Earl Hamilton and Arnold Bergstraesser, the transfer to the Committee on Social Thought was a relatively simple matter. I recall that Majid Khadduri, who was then Visiting Professor in the Department of Political Science, counseled me not to transfer to the Committee on Social Thought because I would have a hard time finding a job. This was true for the first year or so after my return to Baghdad, where no one was able to figure out what my degree was about. But Khadduri, who undoubtedly meant well, had no idea of my lifelong struggle to reach this point. It was John Nef, as Chairman of Committee on Social Thought, who later signed the letter recommending that I study economic history, which was accepted. And when the Iraqi Cultural Attaché who was later to be murdered in one of the sad developments of Iraqi politics—called on John Nef to inquire whether I was really doing economic history, John Nef must have assured him that I was doing economic history (no doubt as John Nef understood it at the time), and of the best kind at that. Once in the Committee on Social Thought, I was free to follow my own interests with the full support of the faculty, none of whom seemed to be interested in the question of my specialization or future job prospects. Since I had already decided to forgo the riches I may have acquired through the study of banking in favor of other riches, neither the question of my specialization nor the question of job prospects occupied my mind at the time.

One of the attractions of the Committee on Social

Thought was that it permitted me to drift in a number of directions until I could find my bearings. And I drifted for almost two years among the rich offerings throughout the university. The late forties and early fifties marked a period when Western culture was trying to heal its wounds, and the University of Chicago under Hutchins was trying to play a meaningful role in this process. One learned at the time, for instance, that Hutchins recalled that he read Goethe while in the trenches in France during the First World War. Under him, the University of Chicago had a close relation with the University of Frankfurt a/M., and we were fortunate to hear a number of visiting lecturers from Frankfurt: reading and interpreting the *Niebelungenlied*, discussing tolerance in the Middle Ages, or searching the sky for a mythical star, as did the historian of science Willy Hartner, whom I was fortunate to meet again in Paris and at Harvard. Internally, one of the advantages of the divisional structure—in the Divisions of the Humanities and the Social Sciences, in any case—was that there could be creative competition between the divisions. In our case, we could see that the social sciences were opening themselves to humanistic studies without much concern for specialization or division of labor. Indeed, one had the impression that the social sciences were trying to co-opt the humanities and hoping to rejuvenate them, if not set them on what was thought to be the right path. The humanities, on the other hand,were increasingly adopting research methods used in the social sciences. Thus, while work in the humanities was in some cases being forced in into the straitjacket of nineteenth-century philology and older social science (glorious as these were in their time), the social sciences were allowing the same disciplines to breathe fresh air. With its emphasis on tradition, poetry, and rhetoric, the Committee on Social Thought did the same for the social sciences.

Once I formulated the dissertation topic, I was inevitably drawn to the Oriental Institute. The Oriental Institute was

"Oriental" in the old or original sense: with concentration on Semitic languages and cultures. The region that interested the Oriental Institute was still largely the ancient Near East. There was little about India, China, or Japan, let alone Southeast Asia or Korea, or Central Asia, in the department associated with the Oriental Institute and known at the time, I believe, as the Department of Oriental Languages.

The Oriental Institute dealt with dead cultures, cultures that were no longer threatening, that did not talk back. The social sciences, on the other hand, tried to understand and communicate with living peoples, perhaps backward, decadent, or whatever, but still living. The social sciences opened the rest of the world to academic investigation through an approach that posed no danger for the self-understanding of modern Western science. They incorporated the rest of the world into their own scheme, with some willingness to modify and expand it; but it remained their own. Still, and within that scheme, one felt the presence of a certain sense of wonder, and the willingness to travel to the end of the earth and bear the hardships of living in strange and sometimes primitive societies, in order to collect the necessary information to prove certain hypotheses. (I recall a former colleague, a political scientist, telling the story of how when the time came to do field work for the dissertation at Harvard, a teacher gathered six of his students for a week-end in a summer place in Maine, where he told them: here is my hypothesis regarding development; each of you is to go to one of these six developing countries and do the necessary field work proving it.) American social science was and remains one of the glories of American higher education as far as Europeans are concerned. The University of Chicago's Social Science Building was, nevertheless, home to a number of teachers who saw through some of the pretensions and empty claims in the way the social sciences were studied at that time.

Hebrew, Arabic, and Chaldean remained the substance of Oriental studies from the Council of Vienna to the French

Revolution. At the Oriental Institute, these languages, as well as Greek and Latin, had become ancillary tools for the study of older, pre-Islamic languages of the ancient Near Eastern countries: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Sumer, Iran. The passion for what is old pervaded much of the humanities. In the Committee on Social Thought, however, we read and interpreted Greek and Latin great books without much attention to ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, or Iran. More importantly, we read and interpreted Kant and Hegel and Schelling, even Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, without much concern for Hindu thought, which had been the rage of intellectual circles in Germany at the time of these authors and had shaped much of nineteenth-century philosophy. That contemporary thought owed much to nineteenth-century German philosophy we all knew, but not that nineteenth-century German philosophy may have had anything to do with Hindu thought. In this and many other senses we followed Spengler without acknowledging our debt to him: cultures were closed entities, and "influence" was a spurious concept. The classic work on early European economic history, Pirenne's *Mohammed and Chlarlemagne*, dealt not with the openness of the West to the rest of Mediterranean culture, but with a West that was closed upon itself as a result of the disruption of Mediterranean trade due to Muslim conquest. It is true that we listened to Toynbee lecture at the Committee on Social Thought, but on the whole we assumed a view of the world where cultures were isolated and tightly sealed from one another, dominated by a particular religion, spirit, world-view, or whatever. The Oriental world, to the extent that it was present in our minds, was known through its incorporation into nineteenth-century German Romanticism in the works of Goethe, Herder, the Schlegels, and Hegel.

Compared with the vast sweep of Spengler's and Toynbee's schemes, John Nef's historical inquiries appeared more specialized. He presented himself as a historian and critic of industrial civilization, arguing that its success made the

attainment of order, charm, and serenity more difficult to achieve. And he presented arguments showing that war did not, as some had claimed, contribute to human progress. He stressed the need to be free from the prevailing nationalisms and think of the service of humanity. This was the mood at Chicago at the time, as shown in the interest in the notion of world government. It was also a view I came across again later upon meeting Alexandre Kojève in Paris. One had the impression that the old concept of *humanitas* was being revived. John Nef started with the simple notion that we do not understand where we are and where we are going without historical knowledge, implying that the comparative studies of the present—the hallmark of the social sciences at the time—did not always lead to the requisite knowledge. To this he added the general notion of the interconnectedness of different aspects of what is called culture or civilization—arguing that economic history alone, his own specialty, was not sufficient. And he was able to account for the relative and historical without becoming a relativist or a historicist. The central issue for him was not specialization as against generalization, but how to transcend specialities without yielding to superficiality.

Listening to him year after year as we sat around the huge oblong table in the seminar room on the third floor of the Social Science Building, he impressed me as a more complete and genuine historian than the two philosophers of history whose work was then in vogue. He was a historian concerned with history pure and simple, with optimism and faith in the spirit of civilized humanity, for whom such terms as love, faith, and charity came naturally and did not sound contrived. Rather than rely on the methodological jargon current in much of the rest of the Social Science Building, he practiced a rare artistic concentration on the sources that led to what seemed seemless interrelations among the different aspects of history at particular times and places. He made no pretense to an overall theory of world history. Here was a historian who started from direct

contact with, and reflection on, the past through original source material rather than through the second-hand accounts of other historians. Like Earl Hamilton, John Nef began with insistence on ascertaining the relevant facts with scrupulous accuracy and on acquiring the ability to handle documents, monuments, and other types of source material, directly. His method, if a method it was, was not so much one of generalization, but—as I observed earlier—of concentration, a habit analogous to that of the artist who concentrates on a particular subject and reveals its nature or essence through such concentration. It reminded one of the importance of works of art, especially complex ones such as architectural monuments, for understanding the complex design of certain written works. Reflection and concentration on the work of great architects and painters seems to enable one to understand what concentration is and what it can produce. This concentration leads also to the intuition of relationships between different aspects of human history, just as it is an intuition of the meaning, message, and implications of the great works of the mind. It is a method that requires patience, time, absorption. Important thoughts do not necessarily emerge when one is at a desk, with the mind full of particular bits of information, but when the mind is emptied of these particulars, when taking a walk, waking up, looking at a building or a picture. Again, like the habit of the artist, this is a habit acquired through practice rather than by learning some general method. To observe such habits practiced by our teachers in their lecture courses and seminars was perhaps the core of what one learned while attending the University of Chicago.

I had to learn to practice this kind of concentration when studying Islamic philosophic works; for with some, no one had reflected seriously on their message and context since medieval times. In the scholarly field, I learned a great deal also from the practice of commentary on religious and philosophic texts. This was a long, hard, and not always relaxing exercise. More

relaxing and pleasant, especially because one could converse about it with friends in other fields of endeavor, was the experience of works of art and literature, particularly for someone like me who was not an art critic or a literary critic. Art and literary works have the great advantage of acting on the mind without resistance. The experience of the visual and literary arts can become the exemplar of the scientific treatment of history. Silently, one looks and listens and stores without verbalization—their logic makes contact with the logos that transcends linguistic particularization. One can look, read, enjoy, and dream. And the opportunity to be in Paris before, during, and after joining the Committee on Social Thought was crucial in this respect. It started when I first landed there on my way to Chicago, when I knew no French at all. Like a deaf person, I learned to concentrate on what I could see and grasp visually, while progressively becoming acquainted with the language and with classical and modern French theater. I am reminded in this context also of the Indian dancers Vashi and Veena, who came to Chicago in the late fifties. Vashi arrived at the beginning of the Fall Quarter, performed with his wife in Mandel Hall, and practically danced his way to a doctorate in Sanskrit—received, if I am not mistaken, by the end of the Spring Quarter of that same academic year. His ability to concentrate as dancer was translated to the ability to write an excellent dissertation in a very short time.

I say all this so that no one may get the impression that the faculty and students at the Committee on Social Thought were doing nothing more than reading and discussing the great books of the Western world, developing broad cultural syntheses from secondary studies, or specializing in general notions. At one point, as I was preparing to spend the summer in Europe, Earl Hamilton gave me a letter of introduction to the well-known French historian Fernand Braudel—at the time the leading figure of the Annales school. I had just come back from Basel and was full of Nietzsche when I went to see him. The

historian's profession, he said, is a *métier* like that of the carpenter: he needs to know his tools and how to handle the source material through long and intimate practice. Then he recalled how he and Earl Hamilton had spent twenty years engaged in research in the Spanish archives before writing their respective major works.

It was not easy to follow in the footsteps of these masters when studying Islamic culture, and those who tried to do so tended to slip. Only a few sources, topics, or monuments had been handled successfully by the masters of that branch of the historical sciences which dealt with Islamic civilization. The vast majority of the sources, documents, manuscripts, and archival materials was only partially catalogued and accessible; the rest remained difficult of access, with new material coming to light almost every day. For instance, only a small portion, and not the most important one, of the writings of the philosopher Alfarabi was known or published, for the most part in inadequate and unreliable editions. Anyone with some knowledge of the state of scholarship in Greek and Latin classics would have thought this field was still where those studies were during the Renaissance period: scholars travelling in search of manuscripts; having one's eye fall for the first time on an important philosophic manuscript whose existence was not recorded before or recorded only summarily; reading about a copy of a manuscript in a private or public collection in Teheran or Kabul or Tashkent and having to travel for half a year to see it, read it, copy it, and edit it—these are experiences that may sound mundane, but they are experiences that few students of the Greek and Latin classics can expect to have. One had a choice: either learn to have direct access to the sources and study and interpret them, or else turn to generating a synthesis on the basis of inadequate knowledge of the sources in imitation of the current practice in Western cultural history.

One of the ideas impressed on us by John Nef was that one way to meet the question of specialization was to

concentrate on a special topic that reveals a whole culture. Ibn Khaldun seemed at the time to lend himself to such a study. I had already been acquainted with Ibn Khaldun in college—a friend had presented me with a copy of his *Prolegomena* and I had written a paper on his life in an Arabic class at the American University of Beirut. But partly due to Earl Hamilton's suggestion, I went to look at the manuscripts of his works in Paris. I was fortunate to find that there were a number of printings of his major work as well as a French translation by De Slane, where the translator had made an effort to collate the main printed text by Quatremère with the manuscripts available at the Bibliothèque Nationale, which I in turn checked to a certain extent just to make sure that De Slane's collations were reliable and thorough. The main objective was an analysis of Ibn Khaldun's method and the interpretation of his relation to Greek and Muslim philosophers and to earlier Muslim historians; and this turned out to be, indeed, a special topic that led into a whole culture. It was also a study related to John Nef's work; for his lectures made me eager to learn how to go about revealing the connections between the evolution in different aspects of human life and to discover what lay behind such connections, that is, what principles covered the evolution of culture or civilization as a whole and for me "principles" meant philosophy, in this case philosophy of history. Here It was necessary to face historicism and relativism and positivism. Ibn Khaldun proved to be the "bridge" I needed between history and philosophy in its Greek and Islamic forms, just as John Nef's lectures proved to be the "bridge" between economic history and Ibn Khaldun.

However, when as a result of this work on Ibn Khaldun I determined that the main Islamic philosophic tradition originated with Alfarabi and that it was necessary to have a comprehensive view of his works and philosophy, the situation was quite different. Most of this philosopher's writings had remained in manuscript form, difficult of access, largely in

Turkey and Iran. They had to be located through extensive research into printed catalogues and in catalogues available only on location in the libraries where the manuscripts were deposited, sometimes buried under such revealing titles as "a treatise by Alfarabi," if not "a collection of philosophic treatises" without an author's name. So they had to be located, photographed, edited, and translated before being analyzed and interpreted. It was as though Aristotle were known only by the few logical treatises translated into Latin in late Roman times which happened to survive into the medieval period. Or, it was as if Plato were known only by the *Timaeus* and a few fragments from the other dialogues, before the Renaissance translations by Pico della Mirandola and others. I had to travel and have microfilm copies prepared on the spot In Kabul, I had to call in a street photographer to make a copy of Alfarabi's *Summary of Plato's Lows* with a 35mm camera using microfilm film I had carried with me all the way from Chicago. In Istanbul, the photographer had to be bribed with extra microfilming film. In Teheran, however, I could not meet the photographer's desire to obtain x-rated American movie cassettes in exchange for the microfilms he prepared as state functionary.

Here again, what I had learned while studying the Gothic cathedral came in handy: not to shrink from learning about the various aspects of the work necessary to bring it to conclusion. Obviously, there was the question of choice and judgment as to the importance of the topic. But once it was decided which of the works were central, the work could begin in earnest. And it was at this stage that John Nef's and Otto von Simson's teaching turned out to be crucial: do not be afraid of being called a jack of all trades, do not be afraid to learn and practice a number of arts, if the subject matter requires it—in this case, being an Arabist, textual critic, translator, and interpreter at the same time. Alfarabi's works were thus pursued with the image of the Gothic cathedral or of seventeenth-century French cultural

history in mind. This happened to be acceptable and even admired in the profession; for there were a number of Orientalists at that time—Louis Massignon, Henry Corbin, and Helmut Ritter among them—who were engaged in the same type of multi-faceted work, and yet were able to free themselves from the confines of the philological-historical tradition of other Orientalists. In any case, I was taught to try and be responsible for every aspect of the work I was doing, even if this meant learning different crafts. I learned these first by example by examining the works of good craftsmen and then by practicing the craft myself. But it was only when working on an edition of the earliest surviving version of the *Arabian Nights* that I think I finally perfected this difficult art. This is where the Orientalist tradition came in handy. It did not impose on one restraints regarding the subject matter of one's work. One could be a professor of Arabic and do one's research in practically any subject matter or a combination of subject matters. So I was free to do what I planned to do in connection with Alfarabi or the *Arabian Nights* without anyone raising an eyebrow or asking for an explanation.

It is difficult to explain the impact of what one learns as a graduate student on his future career as researcher or teacher. I know I was greatly disappointed when I could not pursue my career as a teacher in Baghdad, which started with a lecture on economic history and John Nef's version of it at the College of Commerce and Economics. Later on, first at the University of Chicago and then at Harvard, I tried to encourage students to analyze and interpret philosophic and literary works in their first major written work—the doctoral dissertation—rather than principally accumulate data, edit texts, or translate them even though they were trained in all these helpful arts and had to use them in their studies—and discouraged the kind of dissertation on someone's "life and works" that was common at the time in other distinguished universities such as the University of Paris. Instead, I encouraged students to grapple with major thinkers

and literary works whose analysis and interpretation required concentration and training in the art of thinking and in the particular subject matter treated in these works, whether philosophical or literary. Also, I encouraged them to cross conventional lines and become conversant with the best traditions of philosophic and literary analysis, regardless of whether they happened to be popular at the time.

As a university, Harvard, perhaps even more than the University of Chicago, is particularly open to such ideas in the regular departments. The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences there is not divided into four Divisions as at the University of Chicago. It has never been very large or insistent on technical competence at the cost of liberal education and inventiveness. The departments are not as jealous of their prerogatives. And institutions such as the Junior Fellowship program allow for the kind of freedom and sociability that was encouraged by the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. Crossing departmental lines is easier for both students and faculty members, and not many special interdepartmental organizations are deemed necessary to accommodate student interest in what happens to be interdisciplinary. The individual faculty member—who has a more independent status there than in most other institutions of higher learning I know of—as thesis adviser has more of a say about how a student's work can or should be conducted. Of course, such a liberal system can have its disadvantages: lack of control, unevenness of standards (at Chicago, the committee that read the dissertation and approved it consisted of a larger number of instructors, the whole department was responsible for approving it, and the Dean of the Division sent a representative to the examination session to report to him on how the department behaved), tyranny of the individual faculty member, or else developing a soft spot for a student with whom one has dealt for many years or for the student's personal and family situation. But the relative independence of the adviser can also be used to allow a

graduate student to engage in novel and innovative approaches to the subject matter, without the need to pay much attention to how "science" or "scientific" is understood elsewhere in the field and sometimes even among one's colleagues. All this is partly due to the fact that neither Harvard nor the individual faculty member there needs to prove anything to anybody. Harvard is also more diversified with respect to the academic traditions from which it draws, being heavily British in addition to borrowing from the Germanic and other European traditions from which most graduate schools in the country acquire their faculty. Thus the pursuit of learned specialities in particular fields of inquiry can be pursued along with the kind of investigations encouraged by the Committee on Social Thought, in the same traditionally organized department without much friction, just as was possible in certain departments at the University of Chicago, such as political science and Oriental studies, all along. As for the students, at Harvard students are particularly grateful to be left alone and be directed by persuasion rather than inflexible rules.

All this is perhaps partly due to the so-called field that has come to be my own. For as a professor of Arabic, one needs to know some things like philology and history, but one can choose to specialize in any particular subject matter or group of subject matters. If one chooses to become or remain solely a philologist, one has two choices: either remain silent about any subject matter other than philology, or discourse on other subject matters without knowing what one is talking about, basing oneself on one's prejudices and using one's own culture as the measure. The difficulty is how to encourage students to be interested in a number of disciplines on their own terms and in their interconnections as well. Can one be equally interested in such things as philosophy, politics, and literature? Should students be encouraged to take advantage of interesting questions being raised in classical or medieval studies, in philosophy, as well as in literary theory? Can students be

encouraged to be inventive, to explore new fields of knowledge, to learn to write well, to resist purely technical competence or too narrow monographic studies?

On a personal level, I had learned from John Nef to be fully accessible to and supportive of graduate students, having known something of their struggles and difficulties, rather than remain aloof and skeptical of their worth. In fact, my memory of the Committee on Social Thought faculty on the whole was that there was nothing this faculty would not do to help its students or further their studies. The Committee on Social Thought consisted of a small and intimate group of teachers and students where the students had many opportunities to meet the faculty socially, in the homes of the faculty members or in their own homes, and the students had many opportunities to meet one another as well. The University of Chicago that I and my friends knew, but especially the Committee on Social Thought to which we belonged and whose faculty and spirit formed our souls during those years, was a safe and comfortable haven, full of warmth and energy, sparing nothing that might have benefited the intellectual development of those students whom the faculty considered as junior colleagues. At least this is the way I, and most of my contemporaries, remember, or ought to remember, those formative years we were privileged to be members of this extraordinary institution.

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